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TWO DECADES OF LOCAL HISTORY

BY J. M. GUINN.

(Read November 1, 1903.)

This evening we celebrate the twentieth anniversary of the organization of the Historical Society of Southern California. It is the oldest historical society on the Pacific Coast; the only literary association in Southern California that has maintained its organization intact for twenty years. In this paper I have briefly outlined the origin of our society and have given some of its early history. I have contrasted the city as it was twenty years ago with what it is now, and have endeavored to show that had our society done nothing more than preserve the records of two decades of our city's history, it would deserve well of the community.

In conclusion I have called attention to the almost criminal neglect of our State in not collecting and preserving her historical material, and have contrasted her remissness in this respect with what other states with less history and less wealth have done.

On the evening of November 1, 1883, twenty years ago, a little coterie of representative men of the city gathered in a room of the old Temple Block to organize a historical society. Some of these were comparatively new comers, others were pioneers whose residence in the city covered periods of thirty, forty and fifty years. They had watched its growth from a Mexican pueblo to an American city, had witnessed its transition from the inchoate and revolutionary domination of Mexico to the stable rule of the United States.

The purpose for which they had gathered was clearly stated in the call, but the scope, the purpose and the province of a historical society were not so evident. Only one of the assemblage had been a member of a historical society, and there were those who doubted whether a society purely historical could be maintained. They argued that it would be better to organize a society dual in its nature—part historical and part scientific. A few weeks later, when a constitution was evolved, among the objects for which the society was created were "the discussion of historical subjects, the reading of such papers

and the trial of such scientific experiments as shall be determined by the General Committee."

This General Committee deserves a passing notice. It has long since passed out of the existence of the society, and the memory of it has become ancient history.

It was a decemvirate, a body of ten that was supposed to supervise the affairs of the society. It decided who should become members, what papers should be read before the society, and who outside of the society should listen to their reading.

The society was organized as a close corporation. It was very select. If any outsider yearned to hear the historical discussions or to witness the scientific experiments made within the society's sanctum sanctorum, he applied to some member of the General Committee for permission to enter. His application was submitted to the decemvirate, and if that august body deemed him worthy of the honor and capable of understanding the mysteries of the inner sanctuary, he was allowed to enter. This was the theory of admission. It never got beyond the theoretical stage. No outsider ever ran the gauntlet of the General Committee. The uninitiated remained outside, nor sought to enter; and the society, after trying for several years to be very exclusive, mended its rules, abolished its General Committee and opened its doors to the public.

Of the fifteen men who gathered in that room twenty years ago to form a historical society, nine are dead, two have dropped out of the society through non-payment of dues, two have removed from the city, and only two—H. D. Barrows and J. M. Guinn—are now members.

The names of those who formed that coterie are: J. J. Warner, Antonio F. Coronel, J. G. Downey, George Hansen, H. D. Barrows, J. M. Guinn, C. N. Wilson, John Mansfield, Noah Levering, Ira More, J. B. Niles, A. Kohler, A. J. Bradford, E. W. Jones and Marcus Baker.

The Historical Society of Southern California is not proud of its birthplace. The room where it was born was then used for a Police Court. There the Mayor as Police Judge meted out punishment to tramps and drunks and other transgressors of municipal ordinances.

The walls were dingy and smoke-begrimmed; the furniture consisted of a few wooden benches. A rough table and a few chairs completed the scanty furnishings. Two smoky lamps dimly lighted the interior. Uncongenial as were the environments, they were the best the society could afford then,

for it was poor and obscure at its birth; and it might be added that in its maturer years it is still poor, but not obscure.

A score of years is less than the third of the allotted span of a human life, and but an atom of time in the life of a city. Looking backward through the mist and murk of twenty years to the time when our society was born, and comparing Los Angeles of 1883 with the city of today, it seems as if some magician's wand had wrought the wondrous change. Then there was not a business house on Spring street south of Second. Fort street (now Broadway) was the aristocratic residence street of the city, and we pointed with pride to the palatial homes of our aristocracy that lined the western side of that street between Second and Third. The city then had but two parks—the Plaza and Central park. The latter was enclosed by a dilapidated picket fence. An open ditch ran through it and irrigated the straggling trees that were making a pretense of growing. There were no flowers in it and no grass. A sign at the corner of Sixth and Olive streets warned heavy teams not to cross it. The zanja that watered it meandered through the principal part of the city before it reached the park. It flowed through the Chinese market garden that occupied the present site of the Westminster Hotel. It crossed Main street south of Fourth and then zigzagged across the block bounded by Main and Spring, Fourth and Fifth streets, just below, where now looms up the Southern California Savings Bank sky scraper. Then it meandered across Fort street and on to the park, and out beyond that to the rural regions of Figueroa and Adams street, where it watered the orchards and the barley fields of that sparsely peopled suburb. That ditch was not the Zanja Madre—the mother ditch—of the pueblo; it was not even a pretentious ditch as irrigating ditches go; and yet from the view point of cost it was the most expensive improvement the city has ever made.

A few years before the city fathers had given two of our enterprising citizens 160 acres of city land extending from Main to Figueroa and lying between Seventh and Ninth streets for constructing that irrigating canal. The land donated for that insignificant improvement—for the digging of a ditch—that long since disappeared from the face of the earth—that is lost to sight but to memory so expensive—is today worth fifteen millions of dollars. At that time the city authorities considered they had received full value for the few worthless acres of the many thousands they had at their disposal, but posterity

rises up in judgment against them and rails at them for their woeful waste of a royal patrimony. It is not in good taste, nor is it just to bring railing accusations against our olden time Councilmen for their seemingly lavish disposal of our city lands. Without water the pueblo lands were worthless. With irrigating facilities they could be made productive. Homes would be built, population would increase, and the city's exchequer, which was chronically in a state of collapse, would expand and become plethoric. To make two blades of grass grow where but one grew before is the secret of agricultural wealth. The city fathers well knew that neither the one blade nor the two would grow without water. Had they known that posterity would plant houses where they planted trees, and would grow sky scrapers where they grew grain, they might have done differently and escaped the wailings and the railings of posterity. It is easy to look backward and see errors you have made, but to look forward and avoid making others—that is another story. If the surviving padres and madres of the pueblo could live their lives backward to the beginning, they would be both wealthy and wise when they reached that goal. In giving away city lands for public improvements, the city fathers followed the policy of the national government in the disposal of the public domain.

But to return from this long digression. Twenty years ago when our historical Society was in its infancy, that beauty spot of the municipality of which we are all so proud—Westlake Park—was an alkaline gulch. A few years before the City Council had offered in vain the square now occupied as a park for 25 cents an acre but found no takers. The old timers who had been accustomed to get a 35-acre tract of city land for the making of a hundred dollars' improvements scorned to purchase refuse real estate and perforce the city was compelled to keep the undesirable alkali hole. Two decades ago that aristocratic region that now surrounds Westlake Park, if not quite a howling wilderness, was not exempt from the coyote's nightly wail. Then the scattered families living west of Figueroa street and south of Sixth street only furnished school population enough to fill a single school room—the little school house at the corner of Georgia and Eighteenth streets. The latter street was then called Ocean avenue. Then the public school department of Los Angeles employed fifty teachers—now seven hundred. Then the monthly pay roll of the teachers footed up \$3,700—now \$53,-

ooo, or more than half a million a year. Then there was not a telephone in the city. The mail and the messenger boy were the mediums of intercommunication between citizens, and the wrath of a sender as often boiled hot against the leaden-footed errand boy as it now does against the slow-moving hallo girl.

Twenty years ago the street car system of Los Angeles consisted of two horse car lines. One, starting from the junction of Spring and Main, ran down to Washington street, then west on Washington to Figueroa and southwestward to Agricultural Park. The other line extended from Pearl and Sixth streets to Johnson street in East Los Angeles. Time on these lines, a car every 15 minutes. This was regarded a great improvement; only a short time before the cars ran every half hour—that is if the mules consented. Should the propelling power object, or if the car jumped the track, as it frequently did when the mule became frightened, there might be a delay of half an hour or so in prying it back to the track, a labor in which the passengers were expected to lend a hand. There was a branch line that ran up Main to Arcadia and on to Aliso and across the river to Boyle Heights. The one car of this system made a round trip every two hours. It was regarded as a great convenience to the dwellers on the Heights. A single fare was 10 cents, and a patron had to buy a dollar's worth of tickets to secure a five-cent fare.

When our society was born there was no free mail delivery—no letter carriers, and not a mail box in the city except at the postoffice. Every one went to the postoffice, then located near the corner of Spring and First streets, for his mail. The population of the city was about 14,000.

The conditions in the country around were as primitive as in the city. There was not an interurban railroad in the country. Electricity as a propelling power was unknown and as an illuminating agent it was regarded as a bugbear to frighten gas companies.

Los Angeles, two decades ago, had but one transcontinental railroad, the S. P. R. R. Many of the flourishing towns of the county that now aspire to be cities had neither a habitation or a name. The site of Monrovia was a cattle range, and that of Ocean Park uninviting sand dunes. The sites of Azusa City, Duarte, Glendora, Lordsburg, Claremont, Covina, Arcadia, Garvanza, Burbank, Alhambra, Ocean Park, Whittier, Hollywood and Avalon were either barley fields or barren wastes. Pasadena had a postoffice and a cross-roads store—these and

nothing more in the shape of a town. That aristocratic city of millionaires, twenty years ago, had no railroads, no hotels and no public conveyance to and from Los Angeles except a spring wagon that made a round trip once a day and carried passengers when there were any to carry at the rate of 50 cents fare each way. Long Beach, then known as Willmore City, was an insignificant burg of a dozen rough board houses. It was vainly trying to attract settlers by promising to be very, very good, and to exclude forever from within its portals intoxicating drinks. Its promises were regarded as pipe dreams. How could a city thrive and grow without stimulants? There was not then a temperance town in the county. Avalon, the metropolis of Catalina Island, had no place on the map. Its site was a houseless waste where the wild goats nibbled the scanty verdure unscared by sound of human footfall. Three years later the wild goats were driven away and the jew fish vexed by the founders of Shatto City—the predecessor and progenitor of Avalon.

Briefly and imperfectly I have endeavored to limn for you a picture of Los Angeles and the country around as they were when our society was formed. Then and now are only two decades apart, yet what changes, what momentous events fill up the space between! Even had our society done nothing more than record the current events of our city's history as they passed it would deserve well of the community. It has done more. It has gathered the history of the long past as well as that of more recent years. We have endeavored to preserve these for the future historian. We have published five volumes of history, aggregating 1500 octavo pages. We have issued seventeen annual publications of papers read before the society. Ten thousand copies of these have been distributed throughout the United States and foreign countries. They have gone into England, France, Germany, Austria, Sweden, Italy and Spain. They have crossed the wide Pacific to Australia and New Zealand. They may be found in the historical societies and universities of the Dominion of Canada. Throughout the United States from Maine to Alaska and from the great lakes to the gulf in public or in historical society libraries you may find copies of the annual publications of the Historical Society of Southern California. Our publications are valued and appreciated by the librarians of the great libraries of our own and foreign countries. Bound volumes of our books could be found on the shelves of the great historical library of Wis-

consin; in the library of the University of New York; and in that of the Royal College of Belles Lettres of Stockholm, Sweden, long before they appeared in the reference room of our own city library.

Judging by the past it would seem as if Californians were afraid or ashamed to have the history of their state written.

The one man—Hubert Howe Bancroft—who by collecting and preserving historical material that but for him would have been destroyed—has made it possible to have a complete and reliable history of California, has been abused and his work belittled by scribbling flunkies and partisan bigots because he told some unpalatable truths about certain men and certain institutions. The state should buy his collection and build an historical building in which to place it where it might be made available to students of history.

No state of the Union has a more varied, a more interesting or a more instructive history than California, and no state in the Union has done less to preserve its history.

Wisconsin, with less wealth and half a century less history, has spent a million dollars on her historical building and library. Minnesota, that was an inchoate territory with a few white inhabitants in it when California became a state, has recently completed a handsome and commodious building for its historical society. When Kansas and Nebraska were uninhabited except by buffaloes and Indians, California was a populous state pouring fifty millions of gold yearly into the world's coffers. For more than a quarter of a century, these states from their public funds have maintained historical societies that have gathered great stores of valuable historical material, while California, without a protest, has allowed literary pot-hunters and curio collectors to rob her of her historical treasures.

Montana, Washington and the two Dakotas, that were Indian hunting grounds when California was a state of a quarter million inhabitants, have each its State Historical Society supported by appropriations from the public funds. How long will California endure the disgrace of being the only state west of the Rocky Mountains that has no state historical society—the only state that does not appropriate a dollar to preserve its history? How long! How long!